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Father Abbey's Will



FATHER ABBEY'S WILL;

TO WHICH IS ADDED

A LETTER OF COURTSHIP

TO HIS VIRTUOUS AND AMIABLE WIDOW.

WITH

HISTORICAL AND BIOGRAPHICAL

NOTES. ✓

J. L. Sibley
John S. Sibley.

PRIVATELY PRINTED. —



✓
CAMBRIDGE.

1854.

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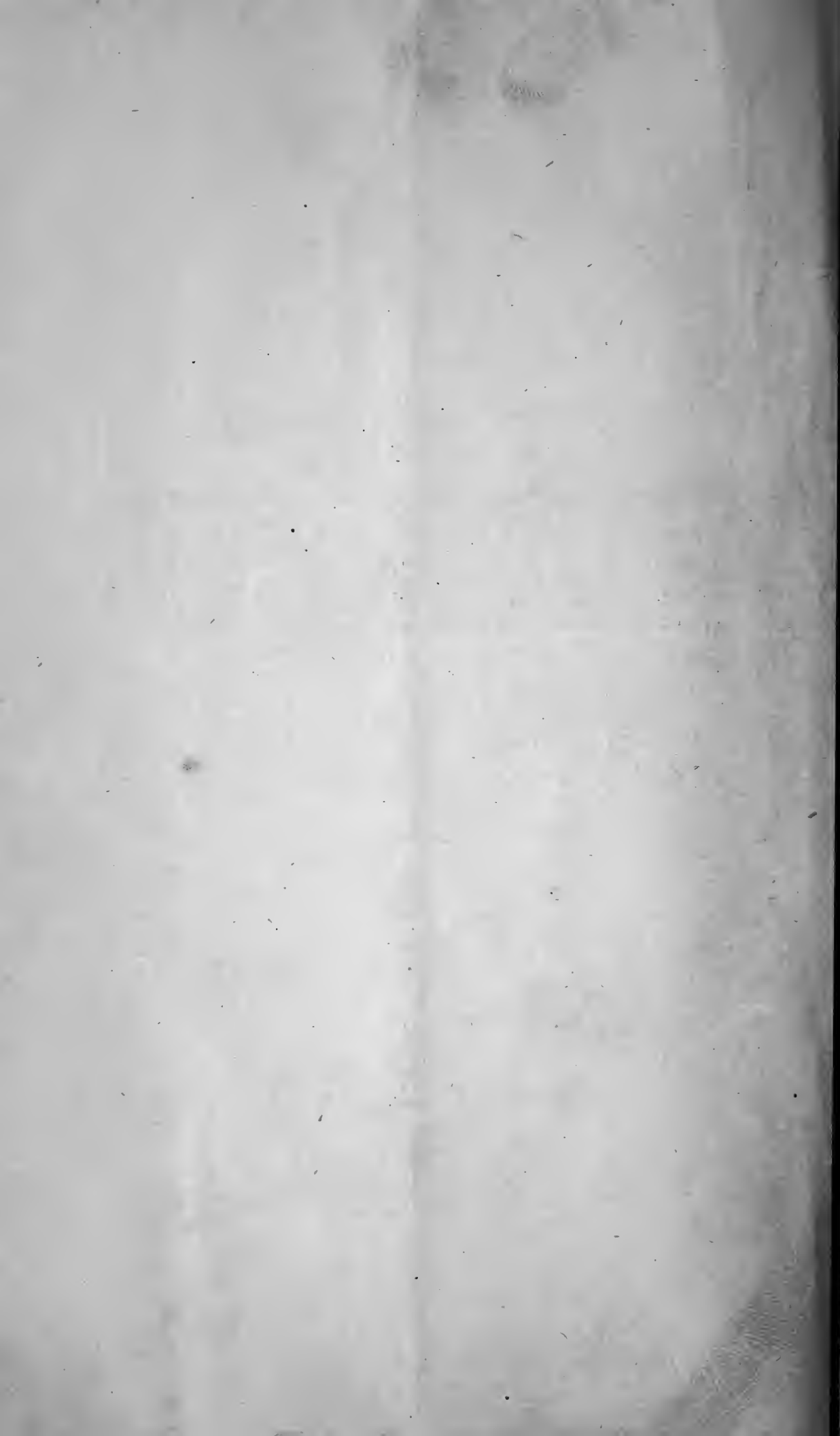
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P R E F A C E.

THE following notices of the ancient Bedmaker and Sweeper at the College, and of his no less ancient Spouse, were prepared for and published in the Cambridge Chronicle, November 18, 1854. At the request of a few friends and antiquarians *fifty* copies are printed in this form for private distribution.

JOHN LANGDON SIBLEY.

*Harvard College Library,
Cambridge, November, 1854.*



“FATHER ABBEY’S WILL;

“To which is now added, a letter of Courtship to his virtuous and amiable Widow.

Cambridge, December, 1730.

“Some time since died here, Mr. Matthew Abbey in a very advanced age: He had for a great number of years served the College in quality of Bedmaker and Sweeper: Having no child, his wife inherits his whole estate which he bequeathed to her by his last will and testament, as follows, viz.

“**T**O my dear wife
My joy and life,
I freely now do give her,
My whole estate,
With all my plate,
Being just about to leave her.

My tub of soap,
A long cart rope,
A frying pan and kettle,
An ashes pail,
A threshing flail,
An iron wedge and beetle.

Two painted chairs,
Nine warden pears,
A large old dripping platter,
This bed of hay
On which I lay,
An old saucepan for butter.

A little mug,
A two quart jug,
A bottle full of brandy,
A looking glass
To see your face,
You'll find it very handy.

A musket true,
As ever flew,
A pound of shot and wallet,
A leather sash,
My calabash,
My powder-horn and bullet.

An old sword blade,
 A garden spade,
 A hoe, a rake, a ladder,
 A wooden can,
 A close-stool pan,
 A clyster-pipe and bladder.

A greasy hat,
 My old ram cat,
 A yard and half of linen,
 A woollen fleece,
 A pot of grease,
 In order for your spinning.

A small tooth comb,
 An ashen broom,
 A candlestick and hatchet,
 A coverlid
 Strip'd down with red,
 A bag of rags to patch it.

A ragged mat,
 A tub of fat,
 A book put out by Bunyan,
 Another book
 By Robin Cook,
 A skein or two of spun yarn.

An old black muff,
 Some garden stuff,
 A quantity of borage,
 Some devil's weed,
 And burdock seed,
 To season well your porridge.

A chafing dish,
 With one salt fish
 If I am not mistaken,
 A leg of pork,
 A broken fork,
 And half a fitch of bacon.

A spinning wheel,
 One peck of meal,
 A knife without a handle,
 A rusty lamp,
 Two quarts of samp,
 And half a tallow candle.

My pouch and pipes,
 Two oxen tripes,
 An oaken dish well carved,
 My little dog,
 And spotted hog,
 With two young pigs just starved.

This is my store,
 I have no more,
 I heartily do give it,
 My years are spun,
 My days are done,
 And so I think to leave it.

Thus father Abbey left his spouse,
 As rich as church or college mouse,
 Which is sufficient invitation
 To serve the college in his station."

AUTHORSHIP OF FATHER ABBEY'S WILL.

The Massachusetts Magazine for 1794, vol. 6, page 696, ascribes to John Seccomb the authorship of "Father Abbey's Will."⁽¹⁾ This statement was called in question in the succeeding volume, page 32, and the authorship attributed to the Rev. Joseph Seccomb, of Kingston, N. H. The editor, the Rev. Thaddeus Mason Harris, D. D., of Dorchester, on page 301, settles the question, in these words:—

"From Thaddeus Mason, Esq., of Cambridge, the only surviving classmate and very intimate friend of the Rev. John Seccombe, the public may be assured that *he*, the long reputed, was the *real* author. His brother Joseph, though a lively genius, never pretended to write poetry; but Mr. Mason was furnished with several poetical effusions of his classmate's. They commenced an early correspondence. And through this channel flowed many a tuneful ditty. One of these letters, dated "Cambridge, Sept. 27, 1728," the editor has before him. It is a most humorous narrative of the fate of a goose roasted at "Yankey Hastings's" and it concludes with a poem on the occasion, in the mock heroic. * * * Mr. Mason⁽²⁾ wonders there have been any doubts respecting the *real* author of this witty production. He is able and ready, were it necessary, to give more circumstantial, explicit, and positive evidence than the present writing."

We know not what has become of the letter or of the "mock heroic," and we cannot speak with certainty of the circumstances to which they owed their origin. But the following facts may shed some light thereon. The author resided in Cambridge after he graduated: In common with all who had received the degree of Bachelor of Arts and not that of Master of Arts, he was called "Sir," and known as "Sir Seccomb." In the autumn after his graduation several geese disappeared at different times from Cambridge Common. The loss occasioned great discomfort to the owner. Some of the "Sirs" as well as undergraduates were arraigned before the college government. At length several of them were fined seven shillings apiece for being privy to and taking the "third" goose, and one of them was fined three shillings more for "lying" about it. On the morning of Nov. 28, 1728, the sentence was announced. This was done in the college hall, after the reading and before the prayer, and a suitable amount of admonition was given against the immoralities condemned. The rogues were required to indemnify the owner, and the one who first proposed to steal the first goose and for being concerned in stealing and eating the "three geese taken on

(1) Abbey is a misnomer for Abdy.

(2) THADDEUS MASON, Esq., was born at Lexington, 27 Dec., 1706, O. S., and graduated in 1728. He taught school in Woodstock, Conn., in 1729, soon after which he became private Secretary of Gov. Belcher, by whom he was appointed Deputy Naval Officer of the port of Boston, in 1731. In 1734 he was appointed Deputy Secretary of the Province. He settled at Charlestown, and was appointed Clerk of the Court of Sessions and of the Court of Common Pleas, for Middlesex, in March, 1735-6, which office he held for 54 years. He was also, for several years, Registrar of Deeds for the same county. Not long after the battle of Bunker's Hill, at which time his mansion was burnt, he settled in Cambridge, where he died, May 1, 1802, aged 95 years and 4 months. He was married three times. On three successive Triennial Catalogues he was the oldest living graduate, and no person who graduated as early as he did, lived into the nineteenth century.

the Common" was sent from college. How much this had to do with the inspiration of the letter and the "mock heroic" is not known; but the writer was a "Sir," and without doubt was well acquainted with the facts in the case. Jonathan Hastings, Steward of the college from 1750 to 1779, was an undergraduate at the time, and he was a son of Jonathan Hastings, a tanner, who was called "Yankee Hastings," and lived on the spot at the north-west corner of Holmes Place, in Old Cambridge, where, not many years since, a house was built by the late William Pomeroy. This "mock heroic" is the earliest and only poetical composition of Mr. Seccomb, besides the Will of Father Abbey, of which we find particular mention. With his wit and apparent genius for rhyming, it is almost certain that he must have "thrown off" other verses, though they may not have come down to us.

POPULARITY OF FATHER ABBEY'S WILL.

"Through the hands of Gov. Belcher, whose secretary Mr. Mason then was, Father Abbey's Will was sent to England, where it was much admired, and published." In May, 1732, it appeared, both in the Gentleman's Magazine and the London Magazine. It was reprinted in the Massachusetts Magazine, in November, 1794. There have been several imitations of it. Till the present generation, portions of it have been familiar to nearly all the good housewives of New England, and we "old folks" remember the interest with which we listened to our mothers' recital of the witty rhymes.

NOTICE OF THE AUTHOR, THE REV. JOHN SECCOMB.

Peter Seccomb, of Medford,(1) Massachusetts, by Hannah Willis, to whom he was married 25 February, 1702-3, had Willis, born 30 April, 1704, who died 15 April, 1725; John, born 3 July, 1705, died 27 May, 1707; John, probably the one who wrote "Father Abbey's Will," born 25 or 28 April, 1708; Charles, born 15 January, 1709-10, died 28 September, 1730; Thomas, born 16 August, 1711, died about eleven o'clock at night, Fast day, 15 April, 1773. Thomas made memoranda of the names of all the clergymen who preached in Medford, together with the texts, the dates, notices of funeral sermons, &c., which are still preserved.

John graduated at Harvard College in 1728. He subsequently studied divinity and was ordained a Congregational minister in the town of Harvard, Massachusetts, 10 Oct. 1733, the day on which the first church in that town was organized. He was married, 10 March 1736-7, to Mercy, born 16 April, 1719, daughter of the Rev. William Williams, of Weston, who was son of the Rev. William Williams, of Hatfield, a son of Deacon Isaac Williams, of Newton. Mrs. Seccomb's mother was grand-daughter of the Rev. Solomon Stoddard, of Northampton.

Respecting Mr. Seccomb's life at Harvard, a correspondent writes:—"In the Church Records I find his name affixed to certain records of Church action, which he made in the discharge of his official duty. Of the causes of the dissolution of his connection with the Parish he is entirely silent—recording only that, by his own request, he was dismissed by an Ecclesiastical Council, and signing

(1) Medford Town Records; Family Bible.

his name 'John Seccomb,' 'Sept. 7, 1757.' Vague and indistinct traditions say that he was impelled to leave his parish, in consequence of a malicious charge of his wife (a second Xanthippe) of "improper familiarity with a domestic.

"In about six years" after his resignation, "he was installed over a Dissenting Church in Chester, Nova Scotia, where he passed the remainder of his days; retaining in a remarkable degree, his mental powers, popularity, and usefulness; and continued to preach to his people to good acceptance, when he required the aid of others in walking to visit the sanctuary of God. He lived about sixty-five years after he was graduated; filled up life with duty and usefulness; Calvinistic in his sentiments, pungent in his preaching; his ministrations were blessed to the people in Harvard. A revival continued three years, and resulted in bringing about one hundred into the Redeemer's Kingdom." (1) He died at Chester, Nova Scotia, in the latter part of the year 1792. (2) Mercy Seccombe, who always added *e* to her name, though it was omitted by her husband, was Executrix of John Seccomb's Will, 9 August, 1793.

FATHER ABDY AND HIS ANCESTRY.

The father of "Father" Abdy, probably from the parish of Stepney, was Matthew Abdy, 15 years old when he embarked for New England, July 1, 1635, "Abord the Abigall, Robert Hackwell, master." He was a fisherman and lived at Pulling Point or on one of the islands in Boston harbor. Perhaps he lived at both places, as fishermen in those days changed their residences frequently. In 1657, he and other fishermen petitioned the legislature of Massachusetts to exempt them from military training during the fishing season. He is probably the same who was living, at the age of 40 in 1669, it being easy, in transcribing, to make the mistake of writing 40 for 49 or 1669 for 1660, by adding a tail to the cipher or omitting it in the 9. He was married in Boston, 24 May, 1662, to Alice Cox, perhaps daughter of Moses Cox, of Hampton, N. H.

By his wife Tabitha, who died in 1661 and who was daughter of Robert Reynolds, a shoe-maker, who lived in Boston, Mr. Abdy had Mary, born 24 May, 1648, and Tabitha, born 24 Nov. 1652, besides Matthew, named in his grandfather Reynolds's Will. This son Matthew, probably born about 1650, in or about Boston harbor, must have been the Father Abdy under consideration. Probably too he is the Matthew Abdy who was married in Cambridge, 10 April, 1688, to Deborah

(1) Rev. Thomas Noyes, of Needham, in the American Quarterly Register, 10; 58.

(2) Mr. Seccomb published "A sermon preached at Halifax, July 3, 1770, at the Ordination of the Rev. Bruin Romcas Comingoe. To the Dutch Calvinistic Presbyterian Congregation at Lunenburg.... Being the first preached in the Province of Nova-Scotia, on such an occasion. To which is added an Appendix" containing the reasons of the Ordination; with the questions publicly propounded on that occasion. The sermon is dedicated "To Malachy Salter, Esq.," because of his "prudent and vigorous measures" "to obtain and establish a fund for the support of such Dissenting Ministers in the Province as needed assistance." It contains "grateful acknowledgements to those charitable persons in Boston, whose late bounty afforded us a very seasonable relief." 8vo. "*Halifax*, printed by A. Henry, 1770." In 1772 was printed at Boston, New England, by Thomas and John Fleet, "A Sermon occasioned by the death of the Honorable ABIGAIL BELCHER, late Consort of JONATHAN BELCHER, Esq.; late Lieutenant Governor and Commander-in-Chief, and His Majesty's present Chief Justice of His Province of Nova Scotia, Delivered at Halifax, in the said Province, October 20, 1771. By JOHN SECCOMBE, of Chester, A. M. With an Epistle, by Mather Byles, D. D. of Boston." Both these sermons are in the library of Harvard University.

Wilson, daughter of Andrew Stevenson, of Cambridge, and widow of Robert Wilson, of Sudbury. And this was perhaps his second marriage, at least; for he was then about 38 years old, and it seems to have been a Puritanic doctrine, which was clung to with more than wonted Puritanic pertinacity, that every man should be married very early in life. If this be so, he must have been rather popular with the gentler sex, for he and his wife Ruth, who in this case would have been at least his third wife, were baptized and admitted to the church in Cambridge by the Rev. Dr. Appleton, 25 February, 1727-8.

FATHER ABDY APPOINTED TO OFFICE.

In President Leverett's Diary, Mr. Abdy's appointment to the honorable office he held in the college is recorded in these words:—

“Harvard College, Feb. 19, 1717-18.

“Matthew Abdy appointed Sweeper and Bed-maker upon probation, And Assign'd to him Stoughton-House, excepting Mr. Sever's Chamber and the rooms above and below the sd. Mr. Sever's(1) Chamber, and the whole of the Presidts. House. Harvard College and the aforesaid reserv'd rooms in Stoughton-House continued to Mary Prentise, And the Establishm't for the Bed-maker is to be paid to them according to sd. Reservation.”

Tutor Flynt, in his private Diary and Account Book, writes:—

“April 16, 1725. Paid Matthew Abdy 5sh for Quincy's two quarter bills for sweeping.”

“May 25, Paid Abdy 3sh for washing a groce of Bottles.”

“Aug. 25, Paid for Quincy to Abdy 9d.”(2)

(1) Rev. NICHOLAS SEVER, born at Roxbury in 1680, a graduate in 1701, was a member of the Corporation of the College and was Tutor from 1716 to 1728. Previously to this he had been settled in the ministry at Dover, N. H., where he was ordained 11 April, 1711. He was afterwards Judge of the Court of Common Pleas in Plymouth County and died 7 April, 1764. While he was Tutor he was prosecuted at common law by Ebenezer Pierpont, a graduate in 1715, who was refused his degree of Master of Arts, on the ground of allegations brought against him by Mr. Sever “of contemning, reproaching, and insulting the government of the College and particularly the Tutors for their management in admission of scholars.” Leverett and Flynt expressly say that the proceedings which grew out of the withholding of the degree “threatened the dissolution of the College.”

(2) JOSIAH QUINCY was grandfather of Ex-President Quincy and a relative of Tutor Flynt, who seems to have been his Guardian or Patron while he was in College. From the Memoir of Josiah Quincy, Jun., we learn that he was the youngest son of Edmund Quincy, and born in Braintree in 1709. He was graduated at Harvard College, in 1728, and entered into business as a merchant in Boston. In 1737, he accompanied his father to England, passed several years in Europe at different periods of his life, and finally returned to America in 1749. He was appointed in 1755, by Governor Shirley, joint commissioner with Thomas Pownall, to negotiate with the Colonies of Pennsylvania and New York, for assistance in erecting a frontier barrier against the French at Ticonderoga. In this mission he availed himself of the influence of Dr. Franklin and was successful. The particular circumstances of this negotiation are related in the Memoirs of that great man, written by himself. Josiah Quincy retired in 1756 from business, and resided in Braintree until his death in 1784. His latter days were saddened by the loss of his son Josiah Quincy, Jun., whose life is intimately connected with the early history of the American Revolution. He was in friendship and correspondence with Washington, Adams, Franklin, Bowdoin, and other distinguished characters of that period. This is the man for whom when a lad in College, Tutor Flynt paid to Abdy a “9d.”

"April 10th, 1727, Abdy washed 10 doz. and 5 bottles as he says, tho' wñ he brought them up he reckoned but 9 doz & 1 at 4d pd Down. Total 3sh. 8d."

"April 27, 1730 Paid Abdy 4sh for washing a groce of Bottles."

These dates show that he was alive and attending to his duties when these charges were made. And this is all that is known of him who has been immortalized in song. As his Will purports to be dated in December 1730 he probably died soon after washing the last "groce of Bottles," though there is no evidence that he died of over-exertion in doing it.(1)

MRS. ABDY AND HER LOVER.

Soon after Father Abdy died and his Will was published, the sweeper and bed-maker at Yale College, a widower, became grievously smitten with the charms of the widow. As there is no evidence that he had ever seen her, he may have been a philosopher who fell in love with an abstract idea of excellence and beauty, or he may have been a gentleman of a romantic turn of mind, whose imagination invested her with the charms of an angel. We might have suspected him of having an eye to the property left to Mrs. Abdy by her spouse, if he did not expressly disclaim such an unworthy motive and foundation for his ardent attachment. Be this as it may, it is evident from the tenderness of his language that he was in great anguish. So great was it, that he was inspired to pour out his feelings in rhyme, and make an offer of his hand and heart. In some mysterious way a copy of the letter was procured. It must have been done without the knowledge of Mrs. Abdy, we are confident, for it was entirely inconsistent with what we may suppose to be her refinement and delicacy, to tell any person that she had received a letter from one whose heart was deeply interested in her. A copy was obtained probably in a surreptitious manner. It was shown to a few *very particular friends*—a matter of course. It was admired. It was found to be replete with genius and tender feelings, and was withal so natural and "so simple", that it was necessary to print it in order to satisfy the public—especially that portion of the public which consists of widowers and old bachelors, and of some ladies. A copy was despatched to England, where new editions of it appeared in the Gentleman's Magazine in June, and in the London Magazine in August, 1732. It was reprinted in the Massachusetts Magazine, in November, 1794. As the copy before us appears to be the original edition and is on the same Broadside with Father Abbey's Will, it occurs to us—though we run the risk of being charged with partiality to the literature of Harvard and unjust to that of Yale—that possibly it may be by the same author.

MRS. ABDY'S LOVER'S LETTER.

We print the letter, and the introduction, as we find it on the Broadside, with the difference of substituting capitals for small letters at the beginning of several of the lines:—

(1) Hon. James Savage: Collections of the Mass. Hist. Society, 3d series, 8; 267: N. B. Shurtleff, M.D.: Cambridge Town Records: Cambridge Church Records: Rev. L. R. Paige, the "painful" city clerk of Cambridge: Diaries of Leverett and of Flynt.

"Newhaven, January 2, 1731.

"Our sweeper having lately buried his spouse, and accidentally hearing of the death and will of his deceased Cambridge brother, has conceived a violent passion for the relict. As love softens the mind and disposes to poetry, he has eas'd himself in the following strains, which he transmits to the charming widow, as the first essay of his love and courtship.

"**M**ISTRESS Abbey
To you I fly,
You only can relieve me,
To you I turn,
For you I burn,
If you will but believe me.

Then, gentle dame,
Admit my flame,
And grant me my petition,
If you deny,
Alas! I die
In pitiful condition.

Before the news
Of your dear spouse
Had reached us at Newhaven,
My dear wife dy'd,
Who was my bride
In anno eighty-seven.

Thus being free,
Let's both agree
To join our hands, for I do
Boldly aver
A widower
Is fittest for a widow.

You may be sure
'Tis not your dow'r
I make this flowing verse on;
In these smooth lays
I only praise
The glories of your person.

For the whole that
Was left by *Mat.*
Fortune to me has granted
In equal store,
I've one thing more
Which Matthew long had wanted.

No teeth 'tis true
You have to shew,
The young think teeth inviting;
But, silly youths!
I love those mouths
Where there's no fear of biting.

A leaky eye,
That's never dry,
These woful times is fitting.
A wrinkled face
Adds solemn grace
To folks devout at meeting.

[A furrowed brow,
Where corn might grow,
Such fertile soil is seen in't,
A long hook nose,
Tho' scorn'd by foes,
For spectacles convenient.(1)]

Thus to go on
I would put down
Your charms from head to foot,
Set all your glory
In verse before ye,
But I've no mind to do't.

Then haste away,
And make no stay;
For soon as you come hither,
We'll eat and sleep,
Make beds and sweep
And talk and smoke together.

But if, my dear,
I must move there,
Tow'rd's Cambridge straight I'll set me
To touse the hay
On which you lay,
If age and you will let me."

MRS. ABDY'S SUBSEQUENT LIFE.

It is not known how much coquetting and cooing and wooing and sparking may have been carried on between the widower and the widow; but it is certain that they were never married. The disconsolate widow continued to live "a single life." We do not find that she ever deviated in the least from the strictest propriety in any respect—unless some may think she erred in not preventing the publicity given to the poetical epistle of the affectionate widower. There is no evidence that she ever laid aside her weeds of mourning. The sun rose and set each day as usual. Month followed month and year followed year and she—continued to sweep and to make beds. After Mr. Abdy's decease she never changed her name. To the last it was *Ruth Abdy*. Finally, at a very advanced age, she passed away. The college rooms no longer resounded with the clatter of her feet and the dump of her pail. The spiders had nothing to fear from her broom. So far as she was concerned, the bugs slept quietly in their beds, except when they issued forth to take a walk or in quest of food. With her the family, as is the case with almost all illustrious families after a few generations, died out. Even the name of Abdy became extinct in Cambridge.

MRS. ABDY'S DEATH.

The good old lady's departure was announced in the Boston Evening Post, Monday, December 13, 1762, in these words:—

"Cambridge, Dec. 10. Yesterday died here in a very advanced age Mrs. Abdy, Sweeper for very many years at Harvard College, and well known to all that have

(1) We think this stanza may be an interpolation. It is found in the London Magazine; but not in the Gentleman's Magazine or on the Broadside.

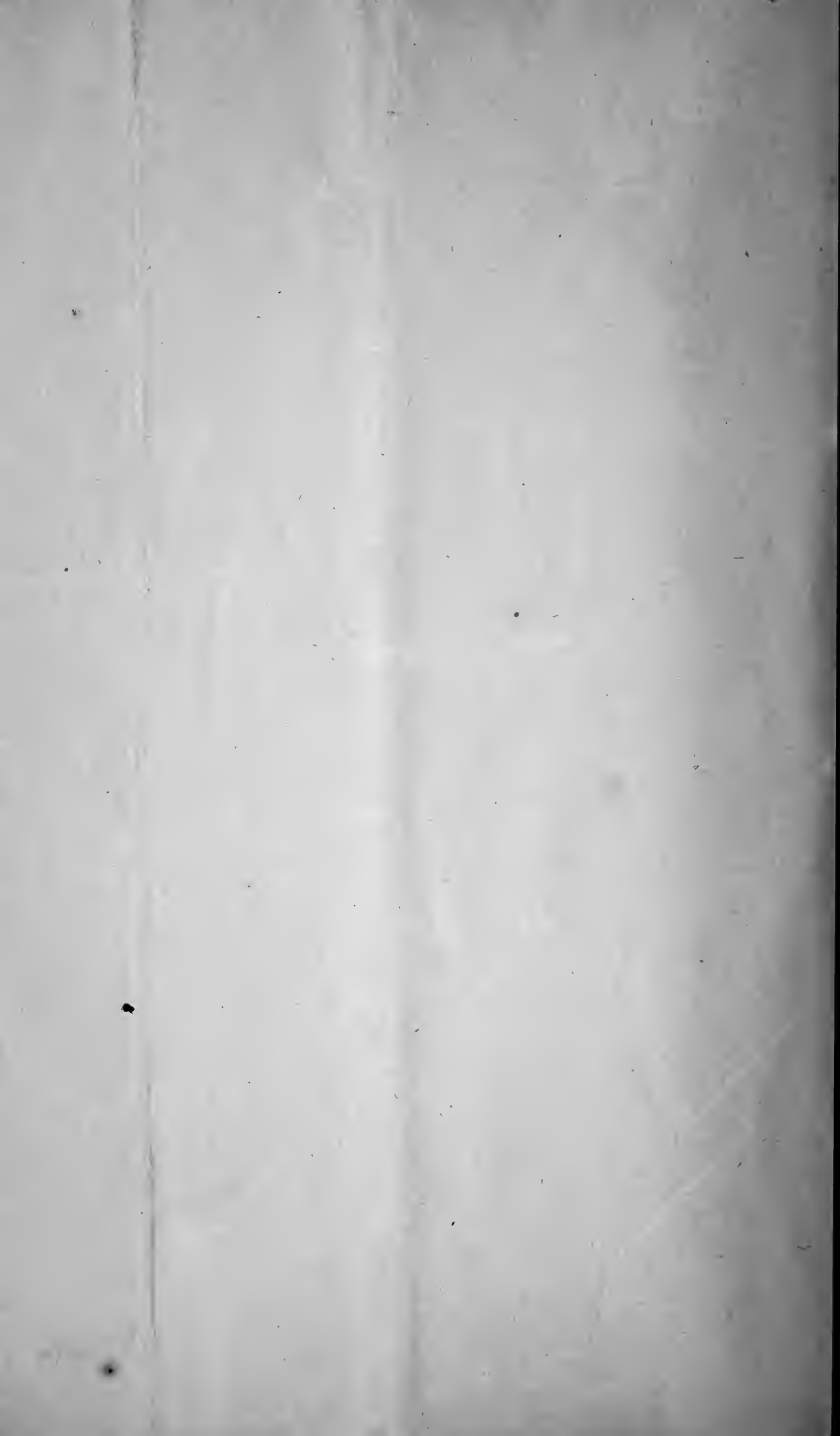
had an education here within the present Century. She was Relict of Matthew Abdy, Sweeper, well known to the learned world by his last Will and Testament.”(1) The Cambridge City Records say that Ruth Abdy died at Cambridge, 10 December 1762, at the age of 93. The tradition is that the Abdys lived on the spot where Mr. Lyman Thurston now resides, south of the Rev. Dr. Albro’s meeting-house and on the southwest corner of Mount Auburn and Holyoke Streets, and that the well was near the small gate in front of Mr. Thurston’s house. No monument of any kind marks Mrs. Abdy’s resting place or that of her husband. Though both of them lived in humble life they were as worthy and their deeds as acceptable to God as many over whom have been reared piles of marble. Truly does the fine old hymn of Herbert say:

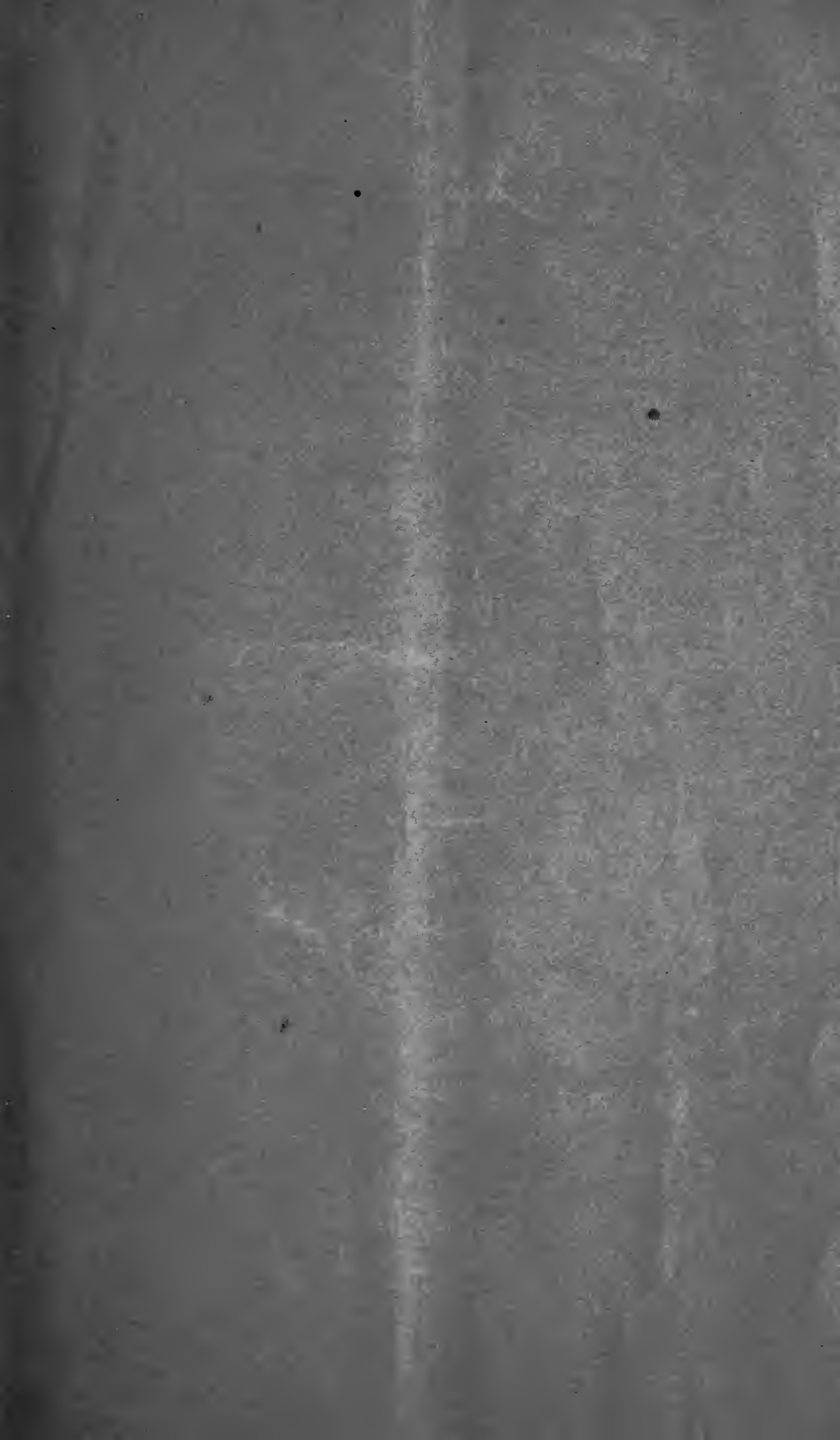
“Teach me, my God and King,
In all things Thee to see,
And, what I do in any thing,
To do it as for Thee.”

* * * * *
“A servant with this clause,
Makes drudgery divine;
Who sweeps a room, as for Thy laws,
Makes that, and the action, fine.”

(1) Communicated by Joseph Palmer, M. D., of Boston.







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